



COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

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An Assessment of Public Issues in Lyon County

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Introduction

Lyon County is located in northwestern Nevada. It is 2,204 square miles in area with an estimated population of 34,501 (NV State Census, 2000). Between January 2001 and May 2002, University of Nevada Cooperative Extension conducted a qualitative assessment of public issues in Lyon County. The purpose of the assessment was to identify those public issues that Cooperative Extension could address through public policy education and research programs.

Public issues are controversial topics that arise from differences in people's values, roles, ideas, and interests. They are matters of concern to the public at large. The controversy that surrounds public issues typically relates to choosing the best action or solution to the problem (Dale and Hahn 1994).

Cooperative Extension can play a critical role in helping citizens manage and resolve contentious public issues through education about public policy choices to address these issues. Through education about the components and complexities of the problem(s) underlying a controversial public issue and various ways to approach it, citizens are encouraged to make better decisions to help shape public policy to constructively address the issue (Dale and Hahn 1994; Danielson 2001).

Method for Conducting the Assessment

The assessment of public issues is based on a qualitative analysis of secondary data rather than primary or survey data. That is, data were collected from two newspapers published weekly in Lyon County. The Mason Valley News covers news events primarily in Mason Valley (Yerington) and Smith Valley (Wellington) or the southern half of Lyon County. The Leader-Courier covers events primarily in northern and central Lyon County which includes Dayton, Fernley, Silver Springs, Silver City, Mound House, Stagecoach, and Mark Twain.

To assess public issues, both newspapers were catalogued on a weekly basis in terms of "headline" news stories; that is, stories that typically are positioned on the front and center page of the newspaper. The titles of these stories were documented and the entire story clipped and catalogued by date providing the secondary data source for this assessment.

These stories were then measured for size in terms of square inches of column space. The size of the story was used to help determine significance of the story. That is, larger stories utilize more advertising space and are thus considered to be of greater news worthiness to the public.

Story size was used to identify and sort public issues into 3 categories of importance or thirds approximately. These are: “very important issues” (99 to 150 square inches); “important issues” (41 to 98 square inches), and; “moderately important issues” (0 to 40 square inches).

The assessment was conducted over a 16-month period between January 2001 and May 2002. To date, this is the first assessment of its kind conducted for Nevada Cooperative Extension and comprises a pilot effort. A review of Cooperative Extension needs assessment efforts nationwide revealed to date that no publications outlining similar efforts were available to serve as a reference or model. Thus, as an indicator of validity and reliability, the research design used in this assessment was reviewed and approved by a four-member panel of Nevada Cooperative Extension professional educators and area specialists.

Public Issues Important to Southern Lyon County

Top news stories reflecting “very important issues” in Southern Lyon County consistently featured water issues and conflicts surrounding water issues within the Walker River Basin. These stories measured from 99 to 148 square inches in total column size. Randomly selected story titles, by descending order of size, along with printing dates are as follows:

- **DAWG [Dynamic Action on Wells Group] president says he can solve Walker water dispute (148si¹) (2/16/01)**
- **Water quality standards confound both sides (120si) (2/23/01)**
- **BLM official says EIS [Environmental Impact Statement] objections fueled by misunderstanding (116si) (1/25/02)**
- **Cooperation urged on superfund issue (114si) (5/25/01)**
- **Concerns fly at [EIS public scoping] meeting in Yerington (105si) (2/2/01)**

- **DAWG, DRI [Desert Research Institute] battle over science used in Walker River EIS (102si)(2/15/02)**

The “important” issues category contained 67 stories which measured 41 to 92 square inches in column size. Water concerns and conflicts remained consistent issues in this category. Selected titles, by descending order, include:

- **Walker River factions face off before high court (86si)(2/16/01)**
- **Are negotiations the answer to Walker River fight?(81si)(8/24/01)**
- **County decries lack of local involvement on Lahontan cutthroat technical team (75si)(3/23/01)**
- **Lake advocates take aim at WRID [Walker River Irrigation District] under Clean Water Act (69si)(7/27/01)**
- **Federal lawsuit latest salvo in Walker Basin water fight (68si)(10/19/01)**
- **Ensign, Gibbons oppose local Superfund listing (68si)(11/13/01)**
- **Walker Lake does not have the only habitat or economy worth saving (59si)(8/10/01)**
- **Is trout recovery effort potential danger to agriculture? (50si) (1/12/01)**
- **Reid, others vow to ‘save’ lake (43si)(4/5/02)**
- **Is Las Vegas interested in Walker River water? (42si)(5/11/01)**

The “moderately important” category contained 36 stories which measured 10 to 40 square inches in column size. Water issues and conflicts remained the prevalent issues. Randomly selected story titles for this category, by descending order, are as follows:

- **Public meeting on trout recovery set for Feb.5(40si)(1/26/01)**
- **Superfund meeting next week (37si)(7/27/01)**
- **Draft report on trout recovery plan due by end of January (36si) (1/18/02)**
- **Reid to host lake meeting in Hawthorne (33si)(3/29/02)**
- **Reid throws support behind Superfund effort (32si)(2/2/01)**

¹ si = square inches

Public Issues Important to Northern and Central Lyon County

Top news stories which reflect “very important issues” in Northern and Central Lyon County consistently featured issues that dealt with resource conservation involving wild horse herd management, population growth, development and land use planning, and the Carson River. These stories measured 104 to 127 square inches in column size and thus fell within the 99 to 150 square inches “very important” category. Story titles, by descending order of size, along with printing dates are as follows:

- **Deputies keep peace during removal of wild horses (127si)(9/26/01)**
- **Dayton area Wild Horse Preservation League formed (116si)(11/28/01)**
- **Silver City frustrated with land use plan (110si)(4/3/02)**
- **Ensign pleased with efforts on Carson River (108si)(8/29/01)**
- **Horse herds running wild in residential areas to be removed (105si)(12/26/01)**
- **Dayton Valley growth plan debate heats up(104si)(3/6/02)**

The “important issues” category contained 48 stories which measured 41 to 96 square inches in column size. Population growth, development and land use planning, remained prevalent issues, as well as wild horse herds and the Carson River. Randomly selected story titles include:

- **Population numbers alter redistricting map (93si)(1/9/02)**
- **Would daytime headlights improve safety at U.S. 50?(87si)(6/27/01)**
- **Fernley weighing community development options (74si)(5/2/01)**
- **More development due east of Dayton (74si)(7/4/01)**
- **Conservation partnerships working on Carson River (73si)(5/12/01)**
- **Is there a new county complex in future of Dayton area? (66si) (11/7/01)**
- **Court denies Truckee water to Fernley farmers (63si)(7/11/01)**

- **State Ag department goal has wild horses’ best interests at heart (56si)(5/8/02)**
- **Dayton Valley road maintenance, medians a thorn in Lyon’s side (52si)(8/15/01)**
- **City, County argue responsibility over some Fernley roads (41si) (2/13/02)**

The “moderately important issues” category contained 15 stories which measured 9 to 40 square inches in column size. Growth management remained the prevalent issue. Randomly selected story titles include:

- **New 1/2-acre zone will only apply in rural areas (35si) (4/24/02)**
- **DRAC [Dayton Residential Advisory Council] says it’s time to slow housing growth (32si)(2/13/02)**
- **City [Fernley] to tackle annexation issues (29si)(4/18/01)**
- **Water, transportation topics of Master Plan review (16si)(1/24/01)**
- **Residents ready to fight for open space (9si)(4/3/02)**

Discussion of Public Issues Assessment

An assessment of public issues in Lyon County indicated several very important public issues. In terms of the types of public issues identified as important in this analysis, however, Lyon County appears divided geographically into two distinct areas.

Citizens in the southern portion of Lyon County, which is located within the Walker River Basin, prioritize water issues and conflicts surrounding water issues related to the Walker River. This finding is not surprising as the southern half of the county is predominantly rural and is economically dependent upon agriculture, primarily onions, garlic, and alfalfa hay. Based upon the assessment of stories featured in the Mason Valley News, concerns appear to be significant with regards to changes in water allocation and demands or increased attention to water quality standards.

In contrast, the northern and central portions of Lyon County appear to be focused on rapid population growth and growth management, development and land

use planning. Natural resource conservation issues are focused on wild horse herd management in the face of rapid residential development and growth as well as ongoing conservation of the Carson River. Booming growth in the cities of Fernley and Dayton is most likely responsible for the interest in these issues. Even small communities which lie between these growth centers, including Silver City, Silver Springs, Mound House, Stagecoach, and Mark Twain, are impacted currently by growth along the U.S. Highway-50 corridor, extending from Dayton and the Interstate-80 exchanges which border Fernley.

Public Issues and Public Policy Education

Cooperative Extension designs and implements research and education programs to target specific community problems. Extension Educators determine which programs to develop and how to develop programs through conducting periodic assessments. This assessment, for example, helped to identify public issues important to Lyon County. It helped to better understand that Lyon County is geographically complex in its issue orientation and populations.

Results of this assessment suggest that extension programs designed for southern Lyon County focus on conflict management and water issues. Programs for southern Lyon County might also investigate the role of agriculture in the economic health of the county as well as rural Nevada.

In contrast, this assessment suggests that extension programs for northern and central Lyon County address growth management and land use planning issues. Such programs could help citizens deal effectively with concerns about natural resource management issues in the face of rapid development and growth, such as wild

horse herds, open space preservation, and conserving the Carson River.

Extension programs designed to address these issues could model the "policy education process" adopted in the 1990s by the Cooperative Extension System and practiced at many land grant universities (Danielson 2001). The primary goal of this process is to provide information to enable citizens to be more informed and participate more effectively in shaping public policy at the local, state, and national level to address public issues.

The process begins with Cooperative Extension helping citizens identify and understand those public issues that are of significant concern. Extension next aids citizens in evaluating alternative solutions to address the issue through providing unbiased information. Finally, through facilitation and instruction, Extension supports citizens in developing and implementing a strategy to resolve the problem. In addition to researching and providing unbiased, factual information about the issues, instruction in communication skills, networking, relationship- building, and critical problem analysis can be an integral part of this policy education process (Singletary et al. 2000).

References

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